

NEVADA STATE TECHNICAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Meeting Minutes • November 17, 2010

The Nevada State Technical Advisory Committee (STAC) met on Nov. 17, 2010 by videoconference, from 9:00 am to 1:30 pm. The host location was the Nevada Farm Bureau in Sparks. Satellite locations participating were Caliente, Carson City, Elko, Ely, Fallon, Las Vegas, and Winnemucca. Satellite locations with no attendees were Battle Mountain, Eureka, Owyhee, and Tonopah.

PARTICIPANTS:

Partners: Michael Pennington, Community Services Agency; Stephanie Wilson, EPA; Dick Reason, Tonopah CD; Michelle Langsdorf, Mason and Smith Valley Conservation Districts (CD); Debbie Goin, Farm Service Agency (FSA); Gerry Emm, Walker River Paiute Tribe; Clint Koble, FSA; Joe Tague, Bureau of Land Management (BLM); Doug Busselman, Nevada Farm Bureau; Maggie Orr, Lincoln County CD; Sandy Gotta, Nevada Division of Conservation Districts; Chris Jasmine, US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS); Joe Cumming, Jiggs CD; Jessi Eckert, Lahontan and Stillwater CD's; Katy Nuffer, FSA; Connie Lee, Nevada Department of Wildlife (NDoW); Robert Matthews, Lincoln County CD; Jenni Jeffers, NDoW; Cheri Howell, Forest Service; Agee Smith, NE Elko CD; Sherm Swanson, UNR/Extension.

NRCS: Bruce Petersen, Paulette Balliet, Gary Roeder, Tim Veil, Thad Heater, Jim Gifford, Jessica Esenarro; Andrea Sestanovich, Jamie Jasmine, Kory Kulinsky, Clint Anderson, Ed Sturges, Debra Brackley, Christie Scilacci, Craig Plummer, Jarrod Edmunds, Ed Biggs, Jennifer Hesselgesser, and Liz Warner

WELCOME - Bruce Petersen, NRCS Nevada State Conservationist, welcomed everyone, thanked them for attending, and apologized for the way the previous meeting ended with the technical issues. He reviewed the accomplishments of the previous year and emphasized that it was a success not only with the amount of money that was allocated, but, more importantly, the number of individuals the agency assisted. One-third more producers were assisted this year. Accomplishments included a 30% increase in delivery of conservation dollars, 163 contracts delivered as opposed to just over 100 the previous year, the field staff being able to provide a plethora of technical assistance such as soils survey information, snow survey information and organic information, the Sage-Grouse Initiative, the High Tunnel (Hoop House) Initiative, hiring of additional staff, and partnering with FWS and NDoW.

FARM BILL PROGRAM OVERVIEW AND DISCUSSION - Bruce provided an analysis of program deliveries from 2009. The largest conservation program, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) was nearly \$11 million with about 75% directed towards irrigation and about 25% directed towards range management, windbreaks, and wildlife practices. He expressed concern about the amount of funding that was spent on irrigation opposed to other practices. Just under \$9 million were spent on irrigation practices, while fewer than \$2 million were spent on 240 other practices covering millions of acres of rangeland. He pointed out that even though much of Nevada's land is federally-administered, there is still the opportunity to work on it using EQIP funds, and that a possible shift in where funds were allocated may need to be considered. Dick Reason pointed out that one possible explanation for the uneven funds was the order of priorities of local Conservation Districts and irrigation being their number one priority.

DISCUSSION ON LOCAL RESOURCE CONCERNS AND INITIATIVES- Bruce initiated the discussion to review the local resource concerns and to assess their order of importance. Resource concerns mentioned:

- **IRRIGATION-** He introduced the ideas of adjusting the cost-share rate of irrigation practices, or make changes in the ranking process, and he requested reactions or opinions on this. Clint Koble brought up the negative effects irrigation has on the groundwater aquifers, and asked how the practice lined up with that of the State Water Master and his water conservation plans for the entire state. NRCS'ers in Winnemucca (Craig Plummer) and Lovelock (Christie Scilacci) pointed out that the majority of their applications were irrigation practices, but that through improved irrigation efficiency, the water problem could be addressed but not solved, and that there would always be a need for irrigation.
- **WEEDS-** Joe Cumming expressed his concern for weeds not being a high priority. He said in his CD, weeds have become a huge issue and, with lack of federal funding, the public lands that sit next to private lands are not controlled so weed management practices on private land have no effect because the landowner is unable to control the weeds on the public land. He also felt that producers were not made well enough aware that a pest management agreement includes weeds. Bruce explained that the ranking process is done through the local workgroups by completing the ranking questions, and the area with top priority will be funded at a higher level than the other applications. Sandi Gotta said that every CD spends a large portion of their grant funding on weeds. Bruce said that pest management could be moved onto public lands and range lands. This became an opportunity with the 2008 Farm Bill that allowed those with public land allotments to apply for EQIP dollars that would cover 75% of the project costs with the other 25% being covered by the individual holding the allotment. It was pointed out that the delivery ditches and adjacent properties must also be treated as they are the mechanism of transport and growth. Gary Roeder stated that he would rather see it as an ecosystem restoration plan instead of just tackling a weed problem. He also said weeds have to be replaced with something to cover the bare ground or they will just come back.
- **TARGETED GRAZING-**Maggie Orr suggested the use of targeted grazing through EQIP dollars as a way to break up sagebrush to get some uneven age stands, to prevent fires, and as a sage-grouse habitat practice.
- **ENGINEERING-**Connie addressed the concern of inadequate engineering, hydrology, and fluvial geomorphology expertise in the design and implementation of fish passages.
- **SAGE-GROUSE-**Bruce mentioned sage-grouse as a resource concern.
- **ENERGY-**Ed Biggs brought up energy consumption as a resource concern and expressed that many producers in his area have stated that through upgrading pumping components, they could reduce their energy consumption by 30%. Applications have been submitted for both AMA and EQIP to upgrade pumps in Smith Valley, Mason Valley, and Fish Lake Valley. Robert Matthews continued the discussion by addressing the lower costs of refurbishing a large pumping motor in comparison to the higher cost of refurbishing a smaller motor, which only enables the larger producers to participate. The effect was noted in Lincoln County and Ely. Reference was made to a variable frequency pump and the energy savings that it could provide, and it was suggested that this system be looked at as a great candidate for pump replacement on a manifold system. Additional comments were made that the entire system needed to be assessed, not just an individual component, to really have a noticeable effect on efficiency and that the replacement of multiple components was, in fact, possible through NRCS funding.

ACTION: Bruce advised that his staff would begin looking into this and try to suggest changes and improvements on the practice and cost list.

- **HIGH TUNNEL INITIATIVE**-Bruce said the High Tunnel Initiative addresses the resource concern of extending the growing season for producers. He felt that it was a great success in allowing the NRCS to reach a new clientele with NRCS programs.
- **WATER QUALITY**- Water quality was mentioned as a resource concern.
- **CONVERSION OF IRRIGATED TO NON-IRRIGATED PROPERTY**-Bruce discussed a proposal from Diamond Valley that requested funding to convert to non-irrigated land because the water table was dropping so quickly. He questioned whether this would be a process that could be considered. The point was made that rules would need to be put into place to ensure that there was no encouraging of producers to sell their water rights for urban use. It was decided that this topic requires more discussion and thought before any action can be taken.
- **FARMLAND CONSERVATION AND RANGE PRESERVATION**-Bruce discussed the importance of farmland and rangeland conservation. He said that there had not been sufficient use of easements to protect the valleys and small ecosystems. Additional comments were made on the need to encourage young people to continue with agriculture. By keeping the youth involved with agriculture, you keep those lands in the hands of farmers and ranchers instead of urban development. Another concern was the recent report on the drop in the Sierra snowpack. The idea of farming alternative crops to sustain the life of the farmland resources was suggested.
- **FIRE**-Fire was mentioned referring mostly to the concern that cheatgrass created after wet years. The idea of fire prevention being much cheaper than firefighting and land rehabilitation drove the discussion. Fall grazing of cheatgrass was further supported by referencing the fact that the perennials are dormant during that time which removes the concern of overgrazing them.

DISCUSSION ON LOCAL WORKGROUP MEETINGS-Bruce began the discussion on local workgroups and what he would like them to accomplish. He pointed out that the Farm Bill requires an annual meeting for each local workgroup.

ACTION: Bruce asked the workgroups provide their opinions on the cost share of programs and the accuracy of them. He also asked that workgroups focus on the order of importance that these resource concerns have for them.

It was pointed out that many of the local workgroups felt that they have no say at all as far as cost share, and that those costs were nowhere near the actual cost of the project, which, for some areas, made it difficult to get participants in the local meetings.

ACTION: Based on that statement it was suggested the NRCS notify local workgroups when an idea that they created is used and is successful, to encourage further participation.

ACTION: And, in order to incorporate their ideas, Bruce notified everyone that he needed to hear from the local workgroups by July or August. Suggestions were made to begin having a Spring and Fall meeting.

And Bruce made it clear that he would try to implement whatever was provided to him as quickly as possible even if it was after the cost list and payment schedule have already been submitted.

DISCUSSION ON PRESCRIBED GRAZING PLANS-Agee Smith brought up the effectiveness of a complete prescribed grazing plan for ranches. This plan would include both grazing and riparian.

ACTION: He also said he would attempt to contact a presenter from the Arizona State Technical Advisory Committee meeting to provide Nevada with further information on the practice.

TECHNICAL SERVICE PROVIDERS-Bruce explained that Nevada had a budget to hire Technical Service Providers (TSP) to assist with the engineering workload that had accumulated. NRCS has used those funds to complete those projects, and he has been working on agreements with agencies that could assist us. He entered into agreements with Nevada Division of Forestry to write burn plans for us, the Nevada Conservation Commission to assist with outreach and Farm Bill delivery, the Eastern Nevada Landscape Coalition to help us partner with land management agencies, and Fish and Wildlife Service to hire a biologist to promote WRP. Carl Clinger noted that the requirements to be a TSP may be too stringent.

ACTION: Bruce stated that he had previously expressed the same concern and would again take up the issue.

Bruce mentioned the Conservation Activity Plan, where a conservation plan is written by a producer-selected TSP-certified planner and funded through the financial assistance (FA).

FUNDING POOLS-Bruce mentioned that there are 18 funding pools. There are 2 funding pools for each of the 9 local workgroups. One is for irrigated practices and the other is for non-irrigated practices. He mentioned a number of special initiatives that have their own funding pools including the Sage-grouse Initiative, Historically Underserved Farmers/Ranchers, Organic Producers, and the High Tunnel Initiative. His question was whether there needed to be more funding pools to serve some of the concerns that were mentioned.

ACTION: A suggestion was made to create a weed funding pool.

ACTION: Maggie suggested creating a fire and targeted grazing fund pool as a preventative practice.

HIGH TUNNEL INITIATIVE-The question of how long the high tunnel initiative would last was asked. Bruce said it is a 3-year pilot. The pilot is in the second year, and high tunnels installed last year are being evaluated. A concern about the effects of the winds was mentioned. Bruce pointed out that each high tunnel has the requirement of the manufacturer's warranty that it withstand our local climate and conditions. (The high tunnel near Fallon that was destroyed due to winds was not an NRCS practice.) Jarrod mentioned that the previous restrictions on producers adding electricity/mechanical devices to high tunnels had been lifted.

SAGE-GROUSE INITIATIVE-Bruce provided a brief summary of current sage-grouse work. An attempt was made to place the sage-grouse on the endangered species list but it was unsuccessful. Nevada was given \$1.7 million to fund practices such as escape ramps in troughs, fence marking/removal, pinyon-juniper encroachment, and rangeland restoration. This is a five-year initiative which will hopefully allow Nevada to keep sage-grouse off of the endangered species list. Joe Tague gave a brief summary of their work on sage-grouse. The BLM is conducting a regional assessment of the central Great Basin to see where the habitat lies and what potentially is causing the changes. They will be looking at fire, invasive species, climate change, and development. The assessment will be completed early 2012.

ACTION: Bruce stated that Liz Warner would e-mail the Sage-grouse Initiative Implementation Plan to the STAC for comments. (Done 11/29/2010 with comments going to Thad Heater. The Plan was signed off by FWS, NDoW and NRCS in December. A copy is attached.)

EASEMENTS-Bruce gave some quick facts on Nevada's easement programs:

- The Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP) preserves farmland and ranches into perpetuity. NRCS partners with an entity to preserve the land. This program requires fund matching. A concern was brought up about the diminishing Q1 funds to match in FRPP. No solution was provided, but partnering with Ducks Unlimited and other non-governmental organizations was offered as one way to find a match.
- The Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) is an easement program for grazing. GRP is funded entirely by the NRCS.
- The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) is getting some new interest in Nevada. Thad Heater, NRCS biologist, is coordinating the program. Thad can be contacted at the Nevada State Office: 775-857-8500 ext. 144.

CLOSING- Katy Nuffer, FSA, Winnemucca, informed everyone of FSA's new conservation Loan Program to cover costs of some producers on EQIP contracts. Those applying do not need a current contract, only an approved conservation plan, and they qualify through cash flow, a high credit score, and debt to asset ratio. Bruce then thanked everyone for their participation and emphasized the importance of holding local workgroup meetings prior to the State Technical Advisory Committee Meeting in the future.

Attachment

Nevada Sage-Grouse Implementation Plan